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Pakistan Sanitation Workers Face Deep Discrimination

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Sanitation workers across Pakistan continue to face entrenched discrimination, with many from religious minority and low-caste backgrounds compelled into hazardous labour without meaningful choice. A recent human rights report has highlighted how these workers are disproportionately drawn from non-Muslim communities and often endure systemic mistreatment, social exclusion, and a lack of legal protections. The findings call for urgent legislative reform to address caste-based discrimination and classify sewage work as hazardous under Pakistan's labour laws.

The work of sanitation is not only physically dangerous but also socially demeaning for many of those forced into it. Testimonies included in the report reveal a pattern of marginalisation where workers are denied dignity and treated as inferior due to their caste or religious background. Many sanitation workers are Christians or Hindus, compelled into this line of work for generations. A worker quoted in the report pleaded, “Cut us open and see that we bleed like them,” expressing frustration over being treated as less than human. Despite their essential service, these workers often remain invisible in both policy and public recognition.

Pakistan’s existing labour laws provide minimal safeguards for sanitation workers, particularly those engaged in manual scavenging and sewage cleaning. These tasks frequently involve life-threatening exposure to toxic waste, often without safety equipment or medical support. International human rights standards require states to protect workers from exploitation and to guarantee equal treatment, regardless of caste or faith. However, implementation in Pakistan remains inconsistent and often fails to reach the most marginalised. Without classification of sanitation as hazardous work, these labourers remain outside the scope of many protective laws.

Addressing this deep-rooted issue requires political will and a recognition that sanitation work, though essential, must not be a trap for the disenfranchised. Legislative measures must directly confront caste-based discrimination and ensure equitable treatment of all citizens under the law. Efforts to modernise Pakistan’s sanitation system must go hand in hand with reforms that uphold dignity and human rights. If the country is to move toward true equality, then those performing its dirtiest but most vital jobs must no longer be treated as expendable or invisible. Justice must not be selective and should be extended to those at the bottom of the social order, who for too long have remained unheard.